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(Photo by: Jean Dixon)

Closing the cultural gap through media analysis

Story by: [Sarah Holloway](#)

6/12/2006

Five University honors students made small steps toward closing the cultural gap between the United States and the Middle East last semester by interacting and corresponding with Islamic students at the American University of Dubai.

Edward Lenert, journalism professor and Fred W. Smith chair of Critical Thinking and Ethical Practices, collaborated with his American University of Dubai colleague, Hamid Khani, an education and media literacy professor, to form a new course, dubbed "intercultural media literacy." The two sought to help students increase awareness of cultural similarities and critically analyze and dissect media.

Using an innovative media literacy curriculum developed by Professor Khani, the five Nevada students and 10 Dubai students analyzed a variety of texts, including cases where the same stories were covered by both CNN and Al Jazeera, attempting to determine whether a cultural bias or political agenda existed in either publication.

Chelsea Hackett, a Nevada freshman, said that she found Al Jazeera to be more thorough and diverse



51° F

Reno



36° F

Tahoe

Data from [NWS](#).



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when comparing the two.

Other Nevada students agreed.

"Most Americans see Al Jazeera as a propaganda tool when it is actually to the contrary," said Neal Morton, a junior journalism major.

The class was so inspiring to Morton that he pursued an undergraduate research grant from the University to continue comparing CNN and Al Jazeera's reporting and determine which is the more reliable source. Hackett was similarly intrigued by the class and plans to do her thesis on comparing Middle Eastern and American news sources.

In addition to news outlet comparison, the students also watched the movie, Munich, directed by Steven Spielberg. Their aim was to analyze any cultural bias that they saw in the movie and write an essay on it and exchange essays between universities.

Nevada students said they saw the movie as an even-handed treatment of both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"It is difficult for us as Americans to see the cultural bias because we are so far removed from the issue," Hackett said. "To me it did not expose the Israeli-Palestine conflict, but focused more on the cyclical nature of terrorism."

Dubai students said they picked up on many small details and said they found the movie to be entirely slanted to make the Palestinians seem like monsters. They cited a range of factors, including seemingly minuscule observations such as when in one scene, when two kinds of music were played, the Palestinian music played on the radio was not reproduced as clearly as Israeli music. The Dubai students also noticed that Israelis spoke clearer English and the Palestinians would speak in Arabic with no subtitles. The students felt that this dehumanized the Palestinians.

"Overall, the two perceptions were so consistently different, it's like they were watching two different movies," Lenert said.

Students also wrote and exchanged essays on their views of the Dubai-based port company that sought to assume ownership of American ports. Nevada students found that much of the American public opinion jumped to racial conclusions before they ever stopped to consider the economical benefit.

"The American public was completely misinformed

because as soon as they heard Middle East, they didn't want to know any more, they just didn't want it to happen," Hackett said.

Many of the students in Dubai said they were very hurt, offended and angry by the American response to the port deal, Morton said.

"They see Americans as thinking that every Middle Eastern person is a terrorist," Morton said. "People in America could be terrorists just as easily as people in Dubai could be."

At the conclusion of the class, students from both universities held a live videoconference where they could talk face-to-face about what they learned and how their perceptions of each other had changed.

"It was a transformative experience for the students," Lenert said. "It changed the way they saw the 'other side' and made them reevaluate their own cultural assumptions."

Many of the students still keep in touch through emails and all agree that this was one of the most eye-opening and interesting courses they have ever taken concerning media.

"No matter how intensive and thorough your education is, culture is the main make-up of your character," Morton said. "It's very hard to divorce yourself from your culture when deciphering media, but I think that this class has given us the tools to do that."

Associated links:

- [Read Reno students' "Letters to Dubai"](#)

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